



Inside Canyonlands

Hunter-gatherer Transcript

Hi folks, I'm Karen Henker at Canyonlands National Park.

Canyonlands can seem a desolate place: with hundreds of square miles of bare rock and no buildings in sight, you might walk fifty yards from your car and feel like you're standing where no human has ever stood.

Chances are, you'd be wrong.

Humans have visited the Canyonlands area for over 10,000 years. Some of the first people here were nomadic groups of hunter-gatherers that roamed the southwest from 8,000 B.C. to about 2,000 years ago. They gathered wild plants and hunted game, and rarely stayed in one place for very long. To our knowledge, they didn't build permanent homes or grow crops, so they left very few artifacts behind.

However, they did create some fascinating rock art, and some of the best examples are right here in Horseshoe Canyon.

Archeologists call this the "Barrier Canyon Style" of rock art. It features tapered, life-size figures - often in large groups - which usually lack arms and legs but may be elaborately decorated. Sometimes the figures are grouped into scenes that depict hunting or harvesting activities.

The Great Gallery is the best known and most extensive of these panels. This site includes dozens of figures - both painted pictographs and petroglyphs pecked into the rock surface. It's located 3.5 miles from a trailhead up on the canyon rim. Now that may not sound like far to walk, but climbing in and out of the canyon requires generous amounts of both water and stamina.

It's hard to date rock art, but archeologists believe the Great Gallery panel may have been created 4,000 years ago, around the same time as the Great Pyramid of Giza. Other evidence of the hunter-gatherer culture that lived here, including clay and split-twigg figurines found nearby, is more like 8,000 years old. That's as old as the first rice farmed in China, and over 5,000 years before the Roman Empire.

In truth, archeologists know very little about these people, including what may have inspired them to create such amazing art. It's possible their reasons were different from modern artists', which means any number of economic, social, or personal issues might have ignited their creative fires. We can only imagine: which is half the fun of looking at them.

The story of Horseshoe Canyon continues to unfold. In 2005, visitors to the Great Gallery reported finding a leather bag eroding out of the sand along the trail. Archeologists determined it was a tool-making kit and food cache that was abandoned just over 1,000 years ago.

The bag provided a rare glimpse into an ancient individual's possessions, and highlighted an important point: in addition to protecting the natural resources, Canyonlands preserves a rich cultural heritage. So when you visit rock art or other archeological sites, imagine you're in a giant, outdoor museum and follow these simple rules:

First, don't climb on walls or walk through structures. You don't want to accidentally destroy something that has lasted for centuries.

Second, don't touch rock art, or add to it with your own markings. Past visitors may not have known how to preserve these sites like we do, but please don't follow their example.

Finally, leave artifacts where you find them. Their location and position provide vital information about when people occupied an area and how they lived. If you find something you think is significant, leave it there and report it to a park ranger.

With appropriate care, future visitors can appreciate these ancient art galleries just as we do today.

I'm Karen Henker. Thanks for joining me on Inside Canyonlands.